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ABSTRACT

This report shows that verbal routines are not easily acquired by adult second language learners and it identifies some of the specific problems they have in acquiring routines. Empirical data concerning the role of verbal routines, (that is, fixed expressions which have been acquired as memorized wholes), in adult second language performance are presented. Thirty Spanish-speaking adults in an advanced ESL class were given the "Routines Test." Correct answers were those agreed upon by all twenty native speakers in the control group. Low test scores showed that common routines ("Thank you," "You're welcome") are not easily acquired. Errors which occurred were paraphrases in 44% of the cases. In many instances, they were syntactically correct but pragmatically deviant, breaking sociolinguistic interactional rules. Twenty-five per cent of the errors were due to partially acquired routines (cf. "Watch up!" "Watch out!"), while 10% of the learners substituted phrases which usually indicated overgeneralization. (PMJ)

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"Watch up!": A Study of Verbal Routines in Adult Second Language Performance

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Prefabricated routines have been defined as predictable utterance sequences serving a single or limited role in language performance (Garvey, 1977). Examples of routines include single words such as "Hello", whole sentences such as "How are you?", and even whole dialogues which have been memorized verbatim from foreign language texts.

Although routines constitute an extremely important part of language,[1] they are rarely examined in either first or second language acquisition research. In fact, there has been no empirical investigation focussing on the acquisition and use of routines by adult second language performers. (However, see Krashen and Scarcella, 1979, for a review of the literature on routines in first and second language acquisition.)

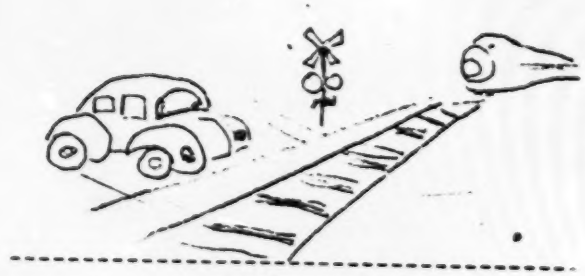
In this report, I examine routines in adult second language performance. In doing this, I report on the findings of studies specifically designed to identify some of the processes affecting the use of routines.

Hypothesis. Adult second language acquirers have difficulty acquiring routines.

Subjects. The subjects of the study were thirty adults enrolled in an adult school in Los Angeles where they studied English as a second language five hours a week. All of the subjects spoke Spanish as a first language and were considered "advanced" ESL students. (Level was determined by placement on the Michigan Test.) The control group consisted of twenty native English speakers who were undergraduate students at the University of Southern California.

Instrument. The "Routines Test" consists of one practice item followed by fifteen items consisting of pictures and accompanying descriptions. (See sample test item below.)

Sample Test Item



Kathy and Maria are driving to school. Kathy is driving. Kathy does not see the train, but Maria does. Maria shouts, "Kathy! _____ There's a train coming."

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Only those items which native speakers agreed upon were tested. For example, in the item above, the control group responded with either "Watch out!" or "Look out!" 100% of the time. The use of this test as a measure of the adult second language performer's knowledge of verbal routines was partially explored in a pilot study conducted with adult ESL students (n=69) who studied at the American Language Institute of the University of Southern California.

Scoring Procedures. Each item was scored as "correct" or "incorrect". Answers not matching those given by the control group were considered incorrect. Spelling errors were, of course, ignored.

Findings. Surprisingly, the test scores were very low. In fact, these advanced second language students were only able to get an average of 38% correct on what appeared to be a test of very common routines, (e.g., "Shut up!", "You're welcome."). To insure that the low scores did not result from a biased sample, one in which the subjects were unusually ignorant of routines, the same test was administered to an entirely different group of adult second language learners (thirty advanced university ESL students coming from a variety of language backgrounds). Again, the test scores were surprisingly low. The average score was only 30% as seen in Table One below.

Insert Table One Here

The significance of this study is that it indicates that many common routines are not easily "picked up" by adult second language students.

Error Analysis

To explore the reasons for the low scores and the processes underlying the use of routines, a detailed error analysis was undertaken. The 220 errors made by the Spanish-speaking subjects in the first study were classified into the categories below.

Insert Table Two Here

Both the number of times an error occurred as well as the number of times it was possible for a subject to make an error were quantified.

Paraphrases

97/220 or 44% of the errors were paraphrases. These errors may reflect an avoidance strategy which the second language performer uses when not knowing an appropriate routine. While such expressions are usually syntactically correct, they may be considered pragmatically deviant since they often break sociolinguistic-interactional rules as seen in the examples below.

Table One

Percentage of Correct Answers on "Routines Test"
Group 1= Spanish Speakers Acquiring ESL (n=30)
Group 2= University ESL Students (n=30)

	Group 1	Group 2
Percentage Correct	38%	30%

Table Two

Percentage of Errors in Each "Error Category" of "Routines Test"

Categories	Number of Errors	Percentage of Total Errors
Paraphrases	97/220	.44
Partially Acquired Routines	55/220	.25
Substitutions	22/220	.10
Translations	20/220	.09
Ambiguous	22/220	.10

Second Language Learner	Native Speaker
Who's behind the door?	Who's there?
Please reduce your speed.	Slow down.
Be in a hurry to be in class on time.	Hurry up!

Partially or Inaccurately Acquired Routines

Partially or inaccurately acquired routines accounted for 55/220 or 25% of the errors. These routines are similar to native speaker routines. Often, only an article or preposition is misused.

Second Language Learner	Native Speaker
Watch up!	Watch out!
Shut off!	Shut up!
Time is off.	Time's up.

These errors may reflect several processes, including acoustic approximation and analogy. Fillmore (1976) explains the role of accustic approximation and routines when she suggests that accurate phonetic rendering of a routine is not always necessary since the relationship between routines and the context in which they occur is often obvious. The concept of perceptual saliency (Slobin, 1971; Brown, 1973; discussed by Hatch and Wagner-Gough, 1976), which proposes that the learner acquires that which she or he is able to perceive most easily, also helps to explain these errors. Burt and Dulay (1974) add to this explanation by suggesting that these types of errors may be precisely those which do not interfere with communication. Richards (1974), on the other hand, explains these errors in terms of analogy. He states: "Analogy seems to be a major factor in the misuse of prepositions. The learner, encountering a particular preposition with one type of verb, attempts to use the same type of preposition with similar verbs... Failure to observe restrictions on article usage may also derive from analogy." (p. 176). This means that the learner may approach routines as though they were analyzable rather than unanalyzable wholes. I suggest here that these partially or inaccurately acquired routines might best be accounted for by both acoustic approximation and analogy which interact with each other in varying degrees.

Substitutions

A small number of cases, 22/220, or 10% of the subjects substituted an inappropriate routine for the correct routine. It appears that these may have been instances of overgeneralization which indicate that the learner has not yet acquired the social-interactional rules underlying the appropriate use of routines, as well as instances where the learner wrote down any routine just to "fill in the blank".

Second Language Learner	Native Speaker
Excuse me.	Sorry.
Welcome.	Bless you.
Thanks.	Time's up.

Word-for-Word Translations

There were some word-for-word translations, (20/220 or 9%). Examples include:

Second Language Learner		Native Speaker
Silence!	(¡Silencio!)	Be quiet!/Shut up!
Congratulations!	(¡Felicidades!)	Happy birthday!
Pass.	(Pase.)	Come (on) in.

In discussing previous literature, Krashen (1977) points out that first language interference is evident in word-for-word translation of phrases, particularly in environments which provide poor intake, (for example, foreign language environments). This study provides evidence which indicates that adult second language acquirers may, in fact, use translations when a similar routine exists in their native language and they are required to use an English routine which they have not yet acquired.

Also, 22/220 or 10% of the errors were ambiguous. These may have been Word-for-Word Translations or Substitutions.

Conclusion

This investigation has indicated that many adult second language acquirers have difficulty acquiring very common routines. It has also pointed out some of the processes affecting the use of routines by adult second language performers. Of course, the usual caveats of error analysis and pen and paper tasks hold here. (See Schachter and Celce-Murcia, 1979. for some reservations regarding error analysis.) Certainly, naturalistic data needs to be examined to confirm and extend these findings.

While this study has emphasized the importance of routines in adult second language performance, it should also be mentioned that routines, when misused, may be detrimental to the second language learner. The learner who relies on verbal routines to feign competence may encourage input, but this input, complex and difficult to understand, will probably not encourage language acquisition. (See Krashen, 1979, for discussion.) Consider, for example, what happens when an adult second language performer uses a few routines to give the impression that he is a fluent speaker of English. (The example given below comes from a three hour natural conversation between Miguel, a twenty-one year old Venezuelan, and his friend, Joe, a native English-speaker.)

Miguel: What about this? ((Pointing to picture))
Joe: Well, it's called "The Broken Bridge and the Dream". I uh I'm not sure what it means. But ya know this is the broken bridge and it kinda looks like=
Miguel: =Uhuh. ((Nodding head))
Joe: The more real everything is, everything is solid but as you get closer here ((pointing)) like man's hopes or his aspirations everything becomes a little more transparent less real.
Miguel: Yeah

Joe: Dali would say I'm wrong. He says everybody's wrong.
Miguel: Very strange. What's this?

Later, in discussing this interaction with Miguel, it became apparent that he did not follow the conversation. He did not know such words as "bridge" or "aspirations". In short, Miguel was using routines to "fake it".

In concluding, it is clear that routines constitute an important part of language worthy of further investigation. Such research should serve to help second language performers (such as the students in this study who have inadequate knowledge of verbal routines) as well as students who like Miguel, know many routines, but overuse them to feign competence.

FOOTNOTES

1. There are many reasons why routines are important in language acquisition and performance. First, research in discourse analysis (see, for example, Hatch, 1978; Sachs, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974) has shown that routines have valuable communicative functions. As discourse conventions, for example, routines are essential in resolving communication coordination problems such as starting and ending conversations. Politeness formulas such as "You're welcome" and "Thanks" are also important in fostering smooth communication. In addition, routines indicate status, familiarity and mood, and mark such social acts as requesting, influencing and apologizing. (Refer to Fraser, 1979, for further discussion.) Second, routines may be a primary means by which second language acquirers increase their input. Fillmore's (1976) investigation of child second language acquisition has provided convincing evidence that routines are important in establishing and maintaining social relations, a practical way of promoting input. Fillmore states: "For adult foreign language students, such devices (routines) facilitate verbal interaction with speakers of the new language naturalistically, these devices are essential in insuring contact with speakers of the language from whom they are learning it." (p. 107). A third reason why routines should be important is that some second language performers who are not particularly proficient in their second language seem capable of acquiring routines. Refer to the case of Miguel, discussed below.) For the student who needs to communicatie, but lacks the necessary structures by which to do so, routines may provide a route to limited language performance. Finally, while it is reasonable to suppose that the adult second language acquirer "picks up" routines quite easily outside of the language class, the studies reported here strongly suggest that this is <u>not</u> the case.

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VERBAL ROUTINES TEST

Directions: Read each item carefully. Then fill in the blank with a short expression (four words or less) which is frequently used in the given situation. You should ask your teacher to explain any words you do not understand. Follow the example below.

Example:

John introduces Susan to his cousin, George. John says, "This is my cousin, George." Susan says, "_____."

1.

Ms. Wiley works in a store. A young woman enters. Ms. Wiley asks the woman,

"_____."

2.

Someone knocks on the door. Brad is wearing his bathrobe. Brad doesn't want to open the door for anyone. Since Brad wants to know who is knocking, he asks,

"_____."

3.

Jean sees her good friend, Bev, standing at the door. Jean wants Bev to enter the room. Jean says,

"_____."

4.

Sally and Bob are running to class. Sally is running faster than Bob. She wants Bob to run faster. Sally shouts,

"_____."

5.

Greg told his friend, Silvia, that he would see her in the cafeteria at 12:00. Greg arrives late. He feels bad. When Greg sees Silvia, he says,

"Hi! _____."

6.

Phil and Terry are going to school. Phil is driving. He is driving too fast. Terry is afraid. Since Terry doesn't want Phil to drive so fast, he tells Phil,

"_____."

7.

Burt's friend, Kim, knows that today is Burt's birthday. When Kim sees Burt, she says,

"Hi, Burt! _____."

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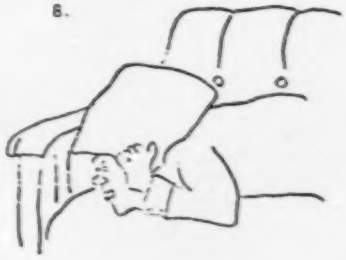
8. 

Mr. Larsen can't sleep because his children are making a lot of noise. Mr. Larsen doesn't want his children to make any noise. He is very angry. He finally shouts,

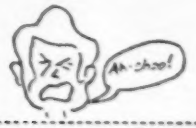
"Alright! That's enough! _____"

_____."

9.

Robert is a waiter. He is taking an order. When he finishes taking the order, he checks to be sure that his customer doesn't want to order more. Robert asks his customer,

"_____"

10. 

David sneezes. His friend, Sharon, politely says,

"_____"

11.

Mel accidentally spills coffee on his friend's white jacket. Mell says,

"_____"

12.

Joe is in a restaurant. After dinner, the waiter brings Joe the bill. The bill is four dollars. Joe wants to give the waiter a one dollar tip. He gives the waiter a five dollar bill. He tells the waiter, "Here's a five dollar bill._____

_____"

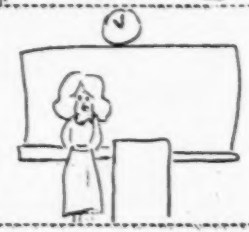
13.

Kathy and Maria are driving to school. Kathy is driving. Kathy does not see the train, but Maria does. Maria shouts, "Kathy! _____ There's a train coming!"

14.

Gary is at a gas station. He wants to buy a full tank of gas. Gary tells the gas station attendant,

"_____"

15. 

Dr. Jenkins is giving her students a test. The students have fifty minutes to take the test. After fifty minutes Dr. Jenkins says,

"_____ Put your pencils down and give me your tests.